Using All Experience As The Path

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:42

I actually never thought during tea time that any of you would make it back into the hall again tonight. I'm really quite impressed.

We say this all the time, but I really mean it. This, in my mind, is one of the most valuable and important times of the retreat. It's the time that we tend to lose it, that we tend to start to notice—or maybe not notice—the barriers that come down and now retreat is over. We're getting on with our life, and it's just in this integration period that we can really start to examine and see how it is that we make these divisions in our mind. Not consciously, of course, but divisions between what's worth paying attention to and what isn't worth paying attention to, where we'll give our effort and where we don't think to give our effort, where it doesn't even occur to us to give our attention.

I personally find this moving from retreat to daily life, this particular coming out and beginning to talk, to be the most excruciatingly painful part of any retreat I've ever done. And that includes a lot of really painful, unpleasant stuff on retreat. I'm not saying this as, "Oh, you should expect horrendous stuff," but just that as excruciatingly painful as it is, over the years I'm finding it to be so rich with learning. A lot of the learning is that I don't even remember to pay attention and forty-five minutes later I wake up and think, "Oh, I've been talking for forty-five minutes, what have I said?" But I just want to say it's really a rich time.

So that's the message that we're always putting out. Meditation and life aren't separate. Meditation is about how we live our life. And the question then always comes up: well, how? I'm not going to give you the how and then you can go home and do it, because there is no one answer. But I want to talk some about that tonight.

Thich Nhat Hanh is great for talking about mindfulness in daily life in very simple terms. He says: "While sitting we practice intensively, and while we are not sitting we do not practice intensively. In fact, we practice non-practice intensively. There is a wall which separates the practice period and the non-practice period. How can we mix the two together? We must practice in a way that removes the barrier between practice and non-practice. When we walk in the meditation hall, we make careful steps very slowly. But when we go to the airport, we are quite another person. We walk very differently, less mindfully. So how can we practice at the airport and in the market? This is engaged Buddhism. Engaged Buddhism does not only mean to use Buddhism to solve social and political problems, protesting against the bombs and protesting against social injustice. First of all, we have to bring Buddhism into our daily lives."

I want to talk tonight about one aspect of our practice that I find very helpful in bringing practice, or

Buddhism, into daily life. Just one aspect of many. And that is what is variously translated as right attitude, right intention, right thought, or right aspiration. Basically, it refers to a way of relating to our experience. As this way of relating to our experience becomes more infused into our being through attention to it, through working with it, we start to change our habit patterns and to act more from this way of being, from this relationship to our experience. We start to understand more what it means when we say that our life is becoming one with our spiritual practice. Or in other words, our life is our spiritual practice.

In and out of retreat, retreat is just, as you know, a microcosm of our daily life. It's the same mind. It's the same tendencies of grasping, the same tendencies of pushing away the unpleasant, the same tendencies of spacing out, getting confused. When we leave the protected retreat situation and go into our life, the situations are more complex, but the principles are the same.

Right attitude, right thought, can be looked at in the specific way of what that energy means in a meditation sitting on the pillow, and also in the larger context of our daily life. The Buddha talked about in his teachings an eightfold path that if we follow it will lead us to understanding, to liberation. Three steps of this path deal with our actions: right speech, right action, right livelihood. Three steps of the path deal with the actual cultivation of the mind, or meditation practice: right concentration, right effort, right mindfulness. And then two parts of the path deal with understanding: right understanding and right attitude. So that's where this concept of right attitude comes from.

When we talk about it here, it takes the form of right aim. This quality we've been talking about—of aiming the mind, the willingness to aim your attention directly at whatever arises in a moment—this is right thought, right intention, right aim. What it implies is a willingness to aim the attention directly without hesitation, without preferences. A willingness to fully meet whatever arises. Also a constancy—not, "Well, maybe I'll pay attention to this one, maybe I'll skip this one"—not giving in to preferences. Not a half-hearted kind of energy or attention, but a full meeting of whatever arises.

The implication in a larger situation, say a daily life situation, is the willingness to meet, to greet, whatever situation comes up in our life as practice, as an opportunity to learn and grow. In other words, not picking which situations we want to pay attention to and which ones we want to just try and get rid of.

A further implication of this willingness to use anything that comes our way—and everything that comes our way—as fodder for growth is a growing understanding, a really seeing, that happiness in one's life is not dependent on having a happy external situation. We're not waiting until everything around us is going smoothly and then we can be happy. Rather, happiness lies in our relationship to the situation. This is what we learn from working with right attitude.

I would imagine that almost everyone here, just during this period of practice, has had a time when you've been able to use a difficult situation as a teacher. It sounds strange when I say it, but so many times—and it never ceases to amaze me—people will come in and talk about some very unpleasant situation that's

going on, either an internal emotional process, a series of memories, physical pain, or somebody that's driving them crazy, some noise that's going on, and they're really suffering from it. And either at that interview or the next one, they say with deep, heartfelt sincerity, "I've learned so much from this situation. I'm really glad that it happened"—even from incredibly difficult and painful situations in our lives.

This is one manifestation of right attitude. Not that we only want painful situations to learn from and we're trying to get rid of the pleasant. We can learn from the pleasant as well. But we don't need pleasant situations in order to be happy. In fact, we begin to see that you can be in the most idyllic situation possible and be miserable if the mind is caught in craving or aversion or simple confusion.

I remember one summer I spent in the most idyllic setting in England that one could imagine—a boathouse on a beautiful river on an incredible fairy-tale estate with swans gliding past. I was miserable. Something in me couldn't open to being there, and I couldn't acknowledge that I couldn't open to being there. What could have been the most beautiful setting one could imagine was just... I don't want to be here, this is boring, I feel like I'm in prison. It's got nothing to do with our external surroundings. This understanding is one manifestation of right attitude.

Another development as right attitude begins to unfold in our life is that it becomes a process through which we begin to grow clear about the real values in our life—our own real internal values. What's important to us on a very deep level? What is our life about?

Rather than going through life just reacting to situations that come to us, positive or negative, reacting out of the impulse of the moment—which is often an impulse of greed or aversion or delusion if we're not really paying much attention—rather than that, we get in touch with what our life is really about for us and what's important. That clarity, that commitment, begins to shine through in our actions, in the way we relate to life. It affects the choices we make. We begin to see that actually we do have choices—choices in what we do, in how we react to certain situations.

I see this at the end of retreats, even in the go-rounds like we have today. There are always a few people who are in the middle of a major life transition. This kind of transition can be one manifestation of a person coming to really grapple with what is truly important in their life. Sometimes that leads to major changes. It doesn't have to. What we're doing right now might be absolutely appropriate. But then we come to do it with more awareness, with more commitment, rather than a feeling of just having fallen into something because that's what came our way.

This leads to a great strength of purpose in our life. It gives us the opportunity and the willingness to use situations that come our way much more consciously—as manure to grow, rather than as something to just be gotten through.

Without this strength of attitude, this growing sense of clarity in ourselves, this beginning to align with what we really feel is important in our lives, difficult situations can drag us down much more easily. We

stay lost for longer periods of time. The reactions of grasping, of pushing away, of delusion—they take over, and we identify much more easily in a difficult situation with our reactions.

Consider a simple situation: someone here who's making noise in the hall. Without that interest to just look at the suffering and see what this suffering is about—why am I suffering in this situation?—without that, it's much easier to identify with the reaction. Either the anger at the person, or the self-blame for feeling angry when we want to be filled with mettā, or self-pity, or spending energy in resistance to the situation altogether, or denial of one's feelings because we don't like them. If it's an unpleasant memory, how much energy can we spend just trying to rework that memory until we get it to come around so it's not quite so painful?

With right attitude, we take that energy and use it to meet the situation constructively. Not denying or moving away from the situation, but using that quality of right aim—meeting the reaction, the situation, just as it is, full on, with full attention. With this attitude of interested investigation, that's where we begin to see where the hooks are. What's going on in this situation that I'm getting so hooked into, that I'm suffering so much from?

Right attitude is often translated as right intention—intention meaning the aim of the mind, the inclination of the mind, what the mind inclines towards. It's considered a crucial link because intention is the forerunner of action. That's one of the reasons we emphasize it in the instructions. As our understanding deepens, it informs the way the mind inclines, and this then affects our actions. The quality of our actions actually begins to change as we give attention to the inclination of the mind, to right attitude. As our understanding deepens, it's reflected in a change in the way we act, in the way we live.

The Buddha, as I've said before, was very practical. While he repeatedly said that freedom comes when the tendencies to greed, hatred, and delusion are uprooted altogether through liberating insight, through deep seeing into the nature of reality, we also don't have to just sit and wait for this to happen. We don't have to say, "Oh well, I just have to be with greed, hatred, and delusion until they're uprooted altogether, and there's nothing I can do about it." He also recognized that we can work on the level of intention, on the level of thought. These seeds of greed, of hatred, of delusion—they surface in the inclination of mind.

They surface in the kinds of thoughts we have that then often lead to action—thoughts of really wanting something that then drive what we go to do, thoughts of anger or self-anger, thoughts of just spacing out.

At the same time that we continue to meet these thoughts with mindfulness, this is not at all a matter of saying, "These are bad, they've got to go." We meet them with clarity, with mindfulness, with acceptance. But at the same time that mindfulness is working to purify, we can also work to cultivate the wholesome counterpart of these unwholesome thoughts. And this is a very deliberate, conscious sort of practice. It's one that we can do sitting here, and it's one that is really quite helpful and strong in our daily life.

So first there's the mindfulness—being aware that, say, there's a lot of angry thoughts, and just being

aware of that. Not "I'm bad, I'm angry, they've got to go." But then realizing that once there's that awareness, and the beginning of the purification that comes when there's awareness, we do often have a choice. At that moment when there's a lot of angry thoughts, we don't have to say, "Oh God, this is bad, it's got to go." Instead, we can deliberately work to cultivate the wholesome counterparts of those thoughts. And this is done with an attitude of acceptance and metta, of love—not an attitude of self-blame.

That we do have a choice is, I feel, a very powerful point of change, and one that we often don't recognize. Sometimes it feels like we don't have a choice. We're locked in the anger and that's it. But if we can acknowledge to ourselves that there is a possibility of transforming, of replacing this energy, we might find that there's much more capacity to do this, much more possibility, than we might expect.

The Buddha talked about three different ways to work with this, three specific types of right intention to cultivate. First is the intention of renunciation—cultivating thoughts of non-greed, which is basically to weaken intentions or inclinations of the mind towards greed, towards grasping. The second is intentions of goodwill, or metta, thoughts of metta. The third is intentions of harmlessness, cultivating thoughts of compassion. Both of these latter two—intentions of goodwill and harmlessness—work as antidotes to the energy of aversion or hatred. The energy of delusion is seen through more by understanding than by deliberately cultivating a different energy.

This is very practical, working on the principle that, as the Buddha said, whatever one reflects upon frequently becomes the inclination of the mind. It's very simple. If there's a lot of thoughts of anger, the more anger there is, the more that becomes the inclination of the mind. When we begin to work in ways that allow thoughts of metta or compassion to be present, the mind will begin to incline more in that direction. Just very simple and practical and direct.

I want to talk a little bit about each of these three intentions, and offer some suggestions for how to incline the mind in each direction. And I'm sure there are many other ways as well.

Renunciation—in other words, thoughts guided by non-greed. Non-greed is a positive quality, a quality of generosity, of freedom from clinging. Renunciation here does not mean enforced asceticism or being a monk. Renunciation is a word that has very strong associations in our culture. But it includes also, in this sense, a sense of inner contentment. Not necessarily that one has to live like a hermit, getting rid of everything, but more cultivating a sense of inner contentment. When we're not needing so much, when we're not so caught up in acquiring—which seems to lead only to more wanting and needing—there's space in the mind to appreciate what's present right here and now. A great ease, a great sense of happiness can come from that, a real kind of peace in the mind.

I feel it's really hard in this culture to begin to cultivate in ourselves a sense of renunciation, of non-greed, just because our culture is so geared in the other direction. It's so oriented towards having and acquiring and being something. But it was the same in the Buddha's time. He described his teaching as running contrary to the way of the world, because desire is the way of the world. Our world is organized to

enhance desire.

Just look at a Sunday New York Times magazine section sometime. The first twenty pages are these incredible advertisements—in case you haven't seen them—incredible ads. I shudder to think how much they cost, these pages of ads for gold jewelry and lipstick and perfume and underwear and fur coats. I'm not particularly inclined toward any of that, but by the time I finish reading one of these sections, I'm going, "Wow, look at that dress! It's only $750 for the skirt." Oh, that's just the skirt. Well, you know, it looks really nice. The mind is easily swayed.

It's not in our culture to say, "Oh, I don't need that. That's okay, last year's skirt will do." When we talk about giving up things or working with non-greed, we tend to think of it as a form of suffering, as a kind of self-mortification. But that's not what I'm talking about at all.

This is a quotation from Lama Yeshe, a Tibetan lama who died several years ago: "Renunciation does not mean that we must give up happiness or that it is desirable to suffer. On the contrary, our aim is to achieve a state beyond suffering. But the aim of most of our daily lives is to try to satisfy each physical desire as it arises, day after day, month after month, year after year. We try to achieve happiness by perpetuating something that is essentially transitory. This expectation, stemming from a misconception, can never be fulfilled and is therefore totally irrational."

Renunciation isn't about getting rid of things so much, or withdrawing from the world and being a hermit. It's a turning away from the craving itself, not so much the objects—a turning away from the desire for gratification. And this beginning to turn away from the movement of craving can be tremendously aided by outer simplification, simply because the simplification gives us the space to see the craving.

That's exactly what is going on here in the retreat situation. You're in this situation of enforced outer simplicity. We've really taken away as much as we could possibly take away and not have a revolt on our hands. And so, look how much—a couple of people said they've been dealing so much with craving and desire in this retreat. That's great. That's part of what the setup is for, to have a chance to see it.

Working with this, the renunciation is outer and enforced, but not really, because you chose it. And that outer simplification then gives the space to look at the process of craving itself. Often one finds—I know it's my experience in retreat—at some point during the retreat, not the whole retreat, but at some point, in this simplified situation with so few things, I begin to see the craving. I begin to give up the wanting for many of the things I could have. I might quit eating so much, or say, "Well, I don't really need to go have tea today. It doesn't really matter."

And the space that opens up in the mind! I'm so much happier in this space of inner simplicity than I am when things are going fine in my life but I'm really caught up in the process of doing and having and wanting. The difference between being here, where you wear the same sweatpants for four days and finally laundry comes and then you can put them back on and no one cares and you don't care—there's

just this real freedom in it. Compare that to going out where this doesn't look so nice and you need to buy something else to match with that, and what about these socks, and maybe if you had that color... It just breeds more wanting, more suffering.

So the simplicity, the renunciation of outer things, is helpful simply because it allows us to see that place inside of us where we can begin to renounce the craving itself. And this allows for appreciation of whatever is here right now to arise. This is such a powerful space—appreciation of what's here now. From Suzuki Roshi: "Renunciation does not consist in giving up the things of this world, but in accepting that they go away."

A couple of things have helped me in allowing the mind to begin to incline towards accepting that things of this world go away. One, of course, and always, is just this watching, this paying attention. When we pay attention to the wanting, to the things that we want, to the results of whether we get what we want or we don't get what we want, the unsatisfactoriness inherent in desire, in the wanting process, just becomes more and more clear. When you start really looking, it's almost impossible to avoid seeing this.

We see how wanting completely influences what we see, influences our relationship to the world, skews our perception completely. If you walk down a street and you're hungry, all you're going to see is pizza parlors. If you want a haircut, all you're going to see is beauty parlors. If you're feeling lonely and your relationship just ended and you go out, all you see is couples—because that's what you want. And the suffering from that is tremendous. If you go out and you're in a relationship and you're feeling really tied down, all you see is single people having a lot of fun. Two people in those situations could see the same crowd of people completely differently, colored by wanting.

When we are beginning to get more in touch with what it is that's really important in our life, what it is that we want to direct our energy and attention to, it helps us begin to sift through this maze of desire that our life often seems to be made up of—these objects of desire that arise constantly in our world. Because we're not just reacting spontaneously, going out there to desire, either getting it or not getting it, and suffering. We actually have the space in our mind to make a choice. "Well, yeah, there's that desire, but is that really where I want to spend my energy?" And we have the power of the mindfulness from the meditation practice to know that we can be with that desire without having to go crazy because we don't have to go out and get it. We can sit with it, it's unpleasant, and it will go away. We don't have to spend all our energy and all our vital force in madly satisfying desires. We don't get so sidetracked.

Working with this attitude of non-greed, this knowing that we have the space to make a choice, helps us move not just from making knee-jerk reactions, but to come out of a kind of comfort of dullness—the dullness of habit that we fall into so easily and don't even recognize we're in. It wakes us up. In each situation we can meet it on its own terms rather than just reacting from habit. But the force of habit is very strong, so without this interest to pay attention and this commitment to our intention in life, we might not even stop to realize that we're acting out of habit.

This is my favorite little comic—I got it off a friend's refrigerator. It's called "What's Your Philosophical Outlook?"

But I call it a right attitude quiz. So, you wander alone down a crowded city street, jostled in the bustle. Solitary yet surrounded, you think, "These people are..." and then this is the quiz. These people are: A, my brothers, my sisters; B, perverts, probably pickaxe murderers; C, I sure could go for a chili dog.

Two: Amid the crowd, a stranger slowly turns. As his eyes meet yours, you muse: A, I know what he feels—he feels hope, he feels fear; B, why is that pervert looking at me?; C, maybe a pepperoni pizza with olives.

And then it goes on and on through various situations. The last one being: Further down, construction workers are tearing the street to rubble. How symbolic, you marvel. It reminds me of: A, the path of life; B, the highway to hell; C, rocky road, my favorite flavor.

This is the force of habit in the mind. But when we're looking at it and willing to work, we have a choice. We can see these inclinations.

Another thing that's immensely helpful in working with this aspect of inclining the mind towards non-greed—and really in all the aspects of Right Attitude—is so obvious, but the power and depth of it has just been increasing in my sense of things through the years. That's this retreat versus non-retreat attitude, looking at the commitment that we bring in retreat to be present, to pay attention, to investigate what's happening, to open to what's happening, to use what's happening to learn. It's an immense amount of effort you've all been putting in here, an immense amount of commitment.

And somehow we all want to continue to grow in the same way in our lives. Of course it's incredibly difficult to put in that type of commitment. But over the years it keeps sinking into me—oh, but that's just as necessary in daily life. It doesn't matter what wonderful insights I've had on retreat. They do open and carry over. But five months later, in the middle of a difficult situation, I have to marshal my commitment, my interest, my energy to look, to pay attention right now. The energy I put in five months ago has some fruit in that I even want to pay attention right now and have the ability and the willingness to look—but I still have to look. I still have to bring the energy to pay attention now, in this situation, because now, this situation, is where the truth is to be seen and nowhere else.

It's a deep, powerful commitment that we all share, and I just find it deepening over the years, this willingness to bring the same energy into looking in our daily life. There are so many ways that once we're making this commitment and we are just open to seeing what's happening right now, all kinds of little ordinary events can wake us up and re-inspire us to pay attention, to use the situation to learn from rather than just drown in it.

You find when you start looking around like this that the fact of impermanence, the fact of not-self, the fact of unsatisfactoriness in things, in outer situations—these just seem to pop up everywhere when our

eyes are opened and looking in that way. Just noticing the seasons change, noticing winter turning to spring, noticing fall turning to winter, and knowing inherent in the fall is the coming of spring, inherent in the coming of spring is the death of fall. Seeing dead animals on the road. Seeing a baby being born. A friend just brought a little puppy over next door, and just seeing that innocence, and seeing inherent in that the whole puppy growing and dying. It's amazing, the whole dance of life. And it's everywhere that we look.

When we start to see in this way, it re-inspires us with what our purpose is and that willingness to continue to use situations. It renews our energy and interest for investigation.

So, the second type of Right Attitude: freedom from ill will, or thoughts guided by mettā. Again, it's this openness to whatever situation is happening—being more able and willing to greet it with friendliness, with openness, rather than resistance or pushing it away. Both internal, which is a lot of what our practice here is about—just can we open to the experience that's happening right now?—as well as external.

This is from Thich Nhat Hanh on how to deal with thoughts of mettā with our internal experience:

"I have to deal with my anger with care, with love, with tenderness, with non-violence. We do not need to consider anger or hatred as enemies that we have to fight, to destroy or to annihilate. Dealing with anger in that way would be like transforming yourself into a battlefield, tearing yourself into parts. If you struggle in that way, you do violence to yourself. If you cannot be compassionate to yourself, you will not be able to be compassionate towards others."

So meeting whatever situation arises, not with judging or ill will, but with this open, friendly, caring attitude. A quality of mettā towards whatever arises in our experience. That's when different situations are no longer in our way—when something difficult happens, it's not just something to bear through until life can open up again. They are literally stepping stones for growth, opportunities to learn.

Namkhai Norbu, a Tibetan teacher, says that whatever arises in life as one's karmic vision is used as the path. Whatever arises, no exceptions. If you really think about that, that's a really powerful statement. No exceptions.

Whatever happens in our life is used as the path of understanding and freedom.

When I look back over my life—in retreat, out of retreat, it doesn't matter—I have to really honestly say that in the difficult times, the really difficult times, I've learned so much more because it inspires me to really pay attention, to really look. It hurts too much not to.

And I'm not saying that when the difficult time is there, I think, "Oh, I'm so glad this is here, now I can really learn." No, I mean it's difficult, it's suffering, it feels like one is lost. It just feels like being in the muck, and we can't wait until it's over. But when we have the willingness to look, it still feels like you're lost in the muck and can't wait until it's over—but the learning is still going on because of that

commitment, that willingness to work with it as something to learn from, as our karmic vision at that time. And we can do this with anything, however minor, however seemingly overwhelming a situation we face in life.

I cut this clipping out of a local paper last year. It's a beautiful example of this. It says, "In Triumphant Return, Ex-Patient Takes Post at Mental Hospital. Forgiveness Paves Way After Misdiagnosis." It's a long article, so I'll just read a few things. Marie Balter was seventeen and clinically depressed when she was misdiagnosed as schizophrenic and placed in a state mental hospital, where she remained for another seventeen years. Since her release, Balter has earned a master's degree from Harvard, worked with psychiatric patients, lectured nationwide, and written an autobiography. Now, fittingly for a woman whose antidotes to adversity are perseverance and forgiveness, Balter has returned as a full-time administrator at the same hospital.

Some of her quotes: "I wouldn't have grown one bit if I didn't learn to forgive. If you don't forgive your parents or your children or yourself, you don't get beyond that anger. Forgiving is a way of reaching out from a bad past and heading out to a more positive future." She says she doesn't bear any resentment or anger over her misdiagnosis and seventeen-year hospitalization. She says it wasn't deliberate on the part of the doctors in the hospital—not much was known about panic disorders back then.

She had a long, slow recovery, but this power of forgiveness—and not just a kind of "I'll forgive and let myself be walked on." You can see from what she's done, it's a huge strength of moving through the situation, not getting stuck there, but being willing to use it as a springboard to learn. The power comes from this working with, inclining the mind towards thoughts of mettā, thoughts of forgiveness, thoughts of love, rather than dwelling in anger and hatred.

It's not about perfection. We're not talking about expecting that now we all have to go out and forgive the most horrible thing that ever happened to us. No, that's unrealistic. It's just about this willingness to see that in a moment when there's a really painful, angry thought, we might have the choice in that moment to generate some mettā. In the next moment there might be more deep pain and anger, and that's okay—we meet that. And then again, can we generate mettā in that moment? This is a powerful force for change in our lives.

It's like Don Juan—the Carlos Castañeda Don Juan—the differentiation he makes between a warrior and an ordinary person: a warrior sees everything as a challenge, and an ordinary person sees everything as a blessing or a curse. A real difference in inner attitude, a real difference in our life.

The third form of working with intentions, right attitude, are intentions of non-harming—in other words, thoughts that are guided by compassion. The contemplation, when we contemplate compassion from an intellectual point of view, is seeing how all beings wish to be free from suffering, and yet all beings still suffer in one way or another. This deepens in our lives to a real experience of compassion, partly through our own experiences of suffering—through the suffering that we are able to open to—and then that allows

us to open to that same suffering in other people.

The Dalai Lama, who is considered the embodiment of compassion, said last fall that for the development of compassion, what is necessary is deep seeing into the pervasive suffering nature of existence and feeling the unbearableness of it. Otherwise, compassion is somewhat hypocritical.

That's a heavy statement, but actually I find it quite inspiring, because when we begin to open up—I mean, what's been going on here, you're all seeing deeply into the pervasive suffering that's inherent in existence. When we open to that, that's what opens us to compassion for others.

It's also very inspiring for me to remember this in the painful times, when you think you're just sitting with this unbearable knee pain and wonder, "What's the point of that?" You can always think, "Well, I'm seeing into the pervasive suffering nature of existence." And really, we are—when we're opening to it, when we're actually allowing ourselves to be with that pain. When we're fighting it, then we're closing ourselves to the pervasive suffering nature of existence.

How do we generate this sense of compassion, this ability to exchange oneself for others? Briefly, one thing I find helpful is beginning to notice how I relate to situations. The same situation—I can relate to it in a way that evokes a sense of interrelatedness between me and the whole situation, or I can relate to it in a way that's completely separating and alienating. And you can really do this with any situation. I'll take a difficult one, but not too difficult.

There's someone here who drives you crazy, what we call a "Vipassana Vendetta"—no matter what they do, it just rubs you the wrong way. The way they walk, the way they sit, where they eat, how they eat, what they wear—anything, you know, it just somehow drives you crazy.

There are two ways you can relate to this, and I can watch in a retreat how the mode of relating shifts back and forth. There's just a sense of "that person is driving me crazy, what are they doing here, why are they doing that, I wish they'd leave." Or "I'm such a horrible person—they're just trying the best they can and here I am sending all these hateful thoughts and probably really ruining their retreat." Either way, there's this sense of real separation—me and them and this situation that's intolerable and has to change.

It's very painful. Basically, it's an attitude of resistance.

When we can actually stop resisting the situation and allow ourselves to just feel the pain of it—not trying to figure out whose pain or who's right or who's wrong, but just feel the pain of it—in that moment, that's when the shift can come. Because often for me, allowing and feeling my own pain and no longer resisting moves into being in touch with and feeling the pain of the other person. Suddenly there's not this sense of me and them and something that's got to be done or gotten rid of, but the situation as a whole, a complete gestalt. And in that there's a sense of our interrelatedness, and the thoughts naturally become ones of compassion—for the pain in this part, the pain in that part. It's not really even two separate pains.

How often has it happened for people that a particular pain you have—say a knee pain or an emotional pain—has seemed very personal and very separating, so that the one in pain feels so alone and so apart from other people, whether it's grief or physical pain or illness? And suddenly there's an opening to allowing and being with that pain rather than resisting it. So often it then moves through into something larger—a feeling where personal suffering becomes a gateway, a key into the suffering of the world. A kind of knowing on a visceral level that we're all sharing in this suffering.

Often people will come in saying, "I'm just having this memory, it doesn't seem that intense, but I feel like I'm experiencing the suffering of the world." Suffering in this way, when we open to it, is a gateway into interrelatedness, into compassion. Beginning to observe our experiences in this way—noticing when we're separated, when we're seeing it more as a whole gestalt—really helps the mind begin to incline towards thoughts of non-harming, thoughts of compassion. Because when we're all connected, the thought of harming just doesn't make any sense. It doesn't even arise.

I went on a little. I could say more about non-harming, but I'll leave it for another time.

Just to emphasize: as with everything, working with right intention, right attitude, is a very rich and full practice. We can do it no matter what the situation, and it imbues our life with a whole other way of being, a richness that it doesn't have when we're just fighting with situations and wanting them to be different.

But it is a practice. We're not going to suddenly—or even not so suddenly—be perfect at it, become beings filled with nothing but mettā and compassion. The habits of the mind to incline towards greed, towards hatred, towards confusion are very deep. The power of conditioning is very deep. We don't just dislodge a thought of anger once and have it never come back, as we all know.

But as the Buddha said, what the mind thinks about, that's what it inclines towards. So the more often we open to working with right intention, the more we realize that there is that space of choice—and that space of choice is coming up moment by moment. In one moment we don't make the choice? That's okay. The next moment we have another choice. It's endless, really.

We begin to find that the mind does actually start to incline in different ways. Where one would have just been caught in resentment, suddenly there'll be a thought of, "Oh well, they can't help it. That's just their own confusion." You kind of go, "Where did that thought come from?" And then back in the resentment. But spaces begin to open up, and the mind really does start to change its propensity. This does begin to affect our actions.

It's hard work. It takes commitment. But what else is there to do with our life? And it's so rewarding.

The other thing one finds is that quite naturally we begin to discover we're not only working to purify and liberate our own separate being, our own separate mind. Because the more we're aware of the possibilities of working with our attitude and intention, the more we're aware that we aren't really a

separate being and a separate mind. In working to liberate this being from suffering, that intention spreads more and more to all beings. We begin to touch more and more all beings with intentions of love and compassion.

I want to end with a quotation from the Dalai Lama:

"The question of real, lasting world peace concerns human beings, so basic human feelings are also at its root. Through inner peace, genuine world peace can be achieved. In this, the importance of individual responsibility is quite clear. An atmosphere of peace must first be created within ourselves, then gradually expanded to include our families, our communities, and ultimately the whole planet."

And so this is what happens naturally when we're willing to give this attention and commitment to our lives.

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